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FM AMEMBASSY CAIRO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7102
INFO RUEHXX/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/30/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [EG](#)
SUBJECT: EGYPT: ACTIONS LOUDER THAN WORDS - GAMAL MUBARAK
AND THE PRESIDENCY

Classified by DCM Stuart Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[11](#). (C) The public profile of Gamal Mubarak, presidential son and rising star in the ruling party, has increased in recent months. His appearance in late March on an evening talk show and a highly publicized visit to a Cairo slum have fueled speculation that an effort to succeed his father is moving full speed ahead. The possibility that Gamal might succeed his father remains deeply unpopular on the street - a sentiment often echoed by commentators in the independent and opposition press. Gamal has denied that he harbors presidential ambitions, but many believe his actions speak louder than his words. The intra-family politics of a Gamal succession bid are unclear. Conventional wisdom holds that Suzanne Mubarak is her younger son's most ardent booster. Gamal's chances are improved by the fact that there are no other obvious contenders for the presidency waiting in the wings. End summary.

Burning Issue

[12](#). (C) The issue of presidential succession is the hottest single issue on Egypt's domestic political scene. Unlike his predecessors, President Mubarak has never named a Vice President. Mubarak, who began his fifth six year term in September 2005, will turn 78 in May. Though he is vigorous and healthy, there is general recognition that the actuarial tables will catch up with Mubarak sooner or later. Speculation that Mubarak was grooming his son Gamal to succeed him increased markedly in 2002, when the younger Mubarak assumed a prominent leadership post in the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP), just two years after Bashar al-Asad succeeded his father in Syria.

Stage Setting

[13](#). (C) Both Gamal and his father have repeatedly denied that there is any plan for a "succession scenario." More important than such words, many Egyptians tell us, are the actions of Gamal, his father, and others, which appear to be setting the stage for the young Mubarak's rise to power. In the summer of 2004 and again at the end of 2005, the President shuffled his cabinet, replacing "old guard" figures with younger, ambitious technocrats, most with direct or indirect links to Gamal. In early 2006, a shake-up in the ruling NDP promoted Gamal to the post of Assistant

Secretary-General (co-equal with Zakaria Azmy, the

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President's de-facto Chief of Staff, and old-guard cabinet veteran Mufeed Shehab). The party shuffle also brought a number of other Gamal allies into key party leadership positions, replacing a number of old-guard rival kingmakers, including the notorious machine politician Kamal al-Shazly.

Settling Down

¶4. (C) Gamal's February engagement to the 24 year old socialite Khadiga el-Gammal is widely viewed as another step on the path to the presidency. In a society where men typically marry before their 30th birthday, Gamal's bachelorhood has extended into his 40's. Thus Gamal's engagement, cynics tell us, was engineered to broaden his appeal.

"Not for Any Other Purpose"

¶5. (C) On March 28, Gamal paid a visit, camera crews in tow, to the slums of Agouza al-Qadima in Giza, just west of Central Cairo. Gamal was there, with Housing Minister (and ally) Ahmed al-Maghraby, to cut the ribbon on new low income housing units prepared by his Future Generation Foundation, a development group he founded in 1999, aimed at addressing the needs of poor youth. Most political observers regard the foundation as a vehicle primarily intended for Gamal's public entree onto the political stage. "We came to help and serve only - not for any other purpose," Gamal told accompanying journalists in Agouza.

¶6. (C) Later that evening, Gamal made a rare appearance on a talk show on State Channel 1, promoted all day in advance of the broadcast and re-aired on March 29. Gamal focused his remarks on his work to rejuvenate the NDP and promote reform and "new thinking." He denied that he was out of touch with the public, asserting that "one enjoys...going down into the street and listening to the people." He also asserted that he regularly visits the provinces, but usually keeps a low profile lest people ascribe ulterior motives. We have noticed an uptick of recent Gamal forays outside of Cairo. He stood in for his father, grounded in Cairo by a dust storm, at the ribbon cutting for an international air show in Sharm el Sheikh. Given all the attention, he could have easily been mistaken as the head of state himself.

Stone Throwers

¶7. (C) On his alleged presidential ambitions, Gamal told Egyptian talk show viewers on March 28 that he had "made clear as daylight" that he did not intend to seek the presidency and was instead focused on his current efforts to promote reform and serve society. These denials have been generally disregarded. "He is repackaging himself - if he is not interested, why is he going to all this trouble?" prominent liberal dissident Saad Eddin Ibrahim recently mused to a western journalist. Former Nasser advisor and influential writer Mohamed Hassanein Heikal has made opposition to Gamal's succession a staple of his regular newspaper columns in the independent press. The notion that Gamal might succeed his father, Heikal has written, is an affront to Egypt's republican principles.

¶8. (C) Abdel Halim Qandil, editor of the Nasserist weekly Al-Araby (and a co-founder of the Kifaya protest movement), was a pioneer of the anti-Gamal movement, authoring in 2003 a series of scathing editorials against the alleged plot to install Gamal and underlining the public's "universal rejection" of the notion. These editorials, many believe,

were linked to Qandil's brief 2004 abduction and beating by still unidentified thugs, who left him bruised and naked on the Suez desert highway.

¶9. (C) Very publicly resigning from the NDP in early March, leading liberal thinker Osama el-Ghazaly Harb told us of his disillusionment with the party's reform process, which he came to believe was merely a vehicle for Gamal to promote his political career. Imprisoned opposition politician Ayman Nour and his supporters have repeatedly insisted to us that it was his threat to Gamal that led to his political destruction. Like Gamal, Nour is 42 years old.

¶10. (C) An article that appeared March 23 in the maverick independent paper Al-Dustour attacked Gamal from a new angle. With dubious sourcing, the paper alleged that the Egyptian brokerage and financial analysis firm EFG-Hermes had manipulated the early March drop of the Cairo-Alexandria Stock Exchange to the advantage of its partners and clients and at the expense of small investors, adding that Gamal Mubarak is on the firm's board. The article clearly got Gamal's attention: He acknowledged in his talk show appearance that he sat on EFG's board, but insisted that his work focused on subsidiary companies not traded on the stock market.

An Open Field

¶11. (C) Despite the sniping of many Egyptian opinion-leaders, and a more general public hostility (echoed by many of our contacts) to Gamal's possible presidential succession, there are few other obvious contenders for the post. The post of Vice President has remained vacant, despite earlier speculation that Mubarak might fill it after the 2005 elections were behind him. Of the 10 candidates who contested Mubarak's presidency last fall, Ayman Nour, who placed second, lost his parliamentary seat under very controversial circumstances and was subsequently convicted of forgery and sentenced to a seven year jail term. The third-place finisher, Wafd Party candidate No'man Gomaa, was arrested for attempted murder and other charges on April 1 (septel). The other eight candidates, marginal figures to begin with, have faded back into nearly total obscurity.

¶12. (C) There are currently almost no other Egyptian personalities with the national stature and political capital needed to seriously contend for the presidency. One exception could be Intelligence Chief Omar Soliman, who wields enormous influence over national security policy and is known to have the full confidence of Mubarak. Soliman is often cited as a potential appointee to the long-vacant Vice Presidential post and his profile has grown with his well-publicized mediation visits to Israel and the Palestinian territories.

¶13. (C) Another possible exception could be Arab League Secretary-General Amr Moussa, who has a high public profile

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and generally receives favorable coverage across the spectrum of Egyptian media outlets. Consequently, he enjoys considerable street credibility as a champion of Arab causes. However, Moussa has never expressed or even hinted at any presidential ambitions and has no Egyptian institutional platform from which to spring. Moussa's assumption of another five year term as Arab League SYG could be alternately interpreted as keeping him "otherwise occupied" or "still in the game," with respect to future political positions, but he has never offered any hint that he intends to wade into Egypt's domestic political scene.

All in the Family

¶14. (C) The intra-family politics of a Gamal succession bid

are unclear. Elder son Alaa', well-known to have extensive business interests (many of which are privately criticized as corrupt and exploitative) keeps a low public profile and has never shown any inclination to wade into the political arena. (A rare sighting of Alaa' on national TV took place during the final game of the Africa Cup championship in late February, when he was photographed in the stadium's VIP section with Gamal, cheering on Egypt to its 2-1 victory over Ivory Coast.)

¶15. (C) The President has been careful not to indicate any overt support for Gamal, is rarely photographed with him, and has on several occasions angrily denied to the media that there is any plan for his younger son to succeed him. While some have speculated that the President is ambivalent about Gamal's political future, he has not stood in the way of the rise of his son and his allies through the ranks of the ruling NDP, or obstructed his increased public profile. Moreover, the President has twice in the past two years shuffled his cabinet and replaced "old guard" elements with younger technocrats linked to Gamal. While there is little public evidence, commonly accepted wisdom in Cairo is that First Lady Suzanne Mubarak is Gamal's most ardent political patron. Unlike the President, the First Lady is often photographed at public events with Gamal, frequently in connection with social issues. Her power and influence, many argue, are keys to Gamal's viability. Sources tell us that she has kept Mubarak from naming a Vice President.

Legal Framework Wired

¶16. (C) The legal/electoral stage, rearranged in 2005 with the amendment of Article 76 of the constitution, currently guarantees that the ruling NDP, increasingly dominated by Gamal and his allies, will retain their lock on the presidency. Of all 20 of Egypt's legally recognized parties, only the NDP currently meets the conditions as defined in the amendment to field a presidential candidate. (The rules set forth in the amendment state that only parties holding five percent or more of the seats in each of the People's Assembly and the Shura Council. The bar is set higher for independents, who must obtain endorsements from 65 PA members, 25 Shura Council members, and 10 local council members from each of at least 14 of the 26 provinces.) While voters will have opportunities to change the current makeup of the Shura Council in 2007 and 2009, and the People's Assembly in 2010, should a presidential transition become necessary sooner, there would be no legal or procedural hurdles for any NDP candidate to the presidency.

A Military Stumbling Block?

¶17. (C) A key stumbling block for any effort to bring Gamal Mubarak to the presidency could be the military. Each of Egypt's three presidents since the republic was established in 1952 were drawn from the military's officer corps, and the military has historically been the ultimate guarantor of the president's rule. Gamal Mubarak did not serve as a military officer (and it is not clear whether he ever completed, even "on paper," his national military service) and unlike his father, can not take the military's support for granted. This factor is often cited by our contacts, who believe that Soliman, the intelligence chief with a military background, would have to figure in any succession scenario for Gamal, if only as a transitional figure. Another theory is that some other military officer could emerge from obscurity as a presidential contender. (Defense Minister Tantawi is acknowledged to be frail and without any political ambition.)

Comment

¶18. (C) Gamal Mubarak's rise in the ruling NDP, his attempts to position himself as a "friend of the people," and as the national champion of reform and "new thinking," are all compelling evidence that his political ambitions are real - denials notwithstanding. Despite palpable public hostility to his succession, and potential stumbling blocks, the way forward for Gamal currently appears open. Gamal and his ambitious allies, such as MP and NDP figure Ahmed Ezz and economic reform ministers such as Rachid Rachid and Youssef Boutrous Ghali, are apparently banking that structural improvements to the economy will deliver tangible benefits to the masses, and build a support base that extends beyond affluent business circles.

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